

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 16, 2021

8:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Mike Cronk
Representative Ronald Gillham

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: School District Perspectives & Updates; Looking Ahead by Fairbanks North Star Borough~ Cordova City~ & Alaska Gateway School Districts

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 19

"An Act relating to instruction in a language other than English; and establishing limited language immersion teacher certificates."

- MOVED CSHB 19(EDC) OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 60

"An Act relating to mental health education."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 19

SHORT TITLE: LIMITED TEACHER CERTIFICATES; LANGUAGES

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) KREISS-TOMKINS

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS

02/18/21	(H)	EDC, L&C
04/09/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/09/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/09/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/12/21	(H)	FIN REPLACES L&C REFERRAL
04/12/21	(H)	BILL REPRINTED
04/12/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/12/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/12/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/14/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/14/21	(H)	<Bill Hearing Canceled>
04/16/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

BILL: HB 60

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) CLAMAN

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/15/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	EDC, FIN
03/31/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
03/31/21	(H)	Heard & Held
03/31/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/16/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

KAREN GABORIK, PhD, Superintendent

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

ALEX RUSSIN, Superintendent

Cordova City School District

Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent

Alaska Gateway School District

Tok, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

REPRESENTATIVE JONATHAN KREISS-TOMKINS

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 19.

SOPHIE JONAS, Staff

Representative Matt Claman

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 60 On behalf of Representative Claman, prime sponsor.

JASON LESSARD, Executive Director

National Alliance on Mental Illness Anchorage

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on HB 60.

EMMA KNAPP, Alumni

Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on HB 60.

GEORGE RHYNEER JR, MD

Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony on HB 60.

KATIE BOTZ

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 60.

PAMELA SAMASH

Nenana, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on HB 60.

KATHLEEN WEDEMEYER

Citizens Commission on Human Rights, Alaska and Washington Chapter

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

APRIL ORTH

Kenai, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

BARBARA TYNDALL

Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to HB 60.

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN

Alaska State Legislature

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, answered questions about HB 60.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:01:07 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Representatives Drummond, Hopkins, Gillham, and Story were present at the call to order. Representatives Zulkosky, Prax, and Cronk arrived as the meeting was in progress.

Presentation: School District Perspectives & Updates; Looking Ahead by Fairbanks North Star Borough, Cordova City, & Alaska Gateway School Districts

[8:03:40 AM](#)

KAREN GABORIK, PhD, Superintendent, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. She said FNSBSD had opened its school to in-person learning for any family that wanted to access the option at the beginning of the second semester. She offered that the district provided a few weeks after winter break to adjust for any COVID-19 transmission that may occur after travel [before beginning the semester]. She shared that elementary schools began on January 19, 2021, middle schools started on January 26, 2021, and high schools on February 2, 2021.

DR. GABORIK said FNSBSD's in-person attendance was at 68 percent. Elementary schools had a higher rate at approximately 80 percent when compared to 52 percent at secondary schools. She said these numbers represented traditional schools but noted that charter schools are using different schedules along with the correspondence school and special programs. She commented that the district was not seeing the jump in attendance it had hoped for over the spring semester. She shared that 2,000 students left the district due to COVID-19 related factors in the previous fall, along with 650 students who moved from in-person instruction to correspondence school. She said this had a significant revenue impact. She said the enrollment was up from October 2020, with an approximate count of 11,200 to 11,700 students. She noted that the district would be doing an

enrollment campaign to encourage families to re-enroll in the district.

DR. GABORIK said that anecdotally the district heard from many families that were still waiting [to re-enroll]. She noted that the eligible age for the COVID-19 vaccination was 16, and some families wanted to vaccinate their children before returning to in-person school. She shared that some parents wanted to finish out the school year in their current model. She added that some parents wanted to know what the next year will look like. She remarked that FNSBSD wouldn't have a hybrid option, and would rather be fully in-person, although the district would have an expanded "E-learning" option and a correspondence option. She said that the other concern was what social distancing and masking would be like in the fall. She commented that some high school students were not returning because "the high school isn't quite ... what they were wanting."

DR. GABORIK said FNSBSD's current school day is shorter than what it normally would be. She shared that the district implemented longer teacher planning time, so teachers had time for the hybrid-remote learning option along with in-person instruction. She said that transportation and food services were running normally. She explained that the district was still working in "pods" with strict "cohorts," but that the learning environment was getting closer to what it would have looked like pre-COVID-19.

[8:09:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked about the district's student count before the pandemic.

DR. GABORIK answered that before the pandemic, NSBSD was projected at 13,281 students, and the October count was 11,260.

[8:10:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked the next presenter, Alex Russin, what a school day looked like for his district.

ALEX RUSSIN, Superintendent, Cordova City School District (CCSD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. In response to the question, he said CCSD looks at every day as an opportunity to learn something new and to grow. He offered that his district has been in person all year, but that CCSD started off the school year in a "staged

approach," which meant dividing the kindergarten through twelfth-grade ("k-12") classes into two different cohort groups. He explained that the district has two schools, a kindergarten through sixth-grade elementary school and a seventh- through twelfth-grade junior/senior high school. He explained that each cohort comes in for part of the school day in person. He said the schools prepared for the need to go to a remote learning platform. He said cohort "A" spent the first week of school in person, while cohort "B" started online. He said this was because there were new mitigation strategy processes and new things to implement to which students and staff weren't accustomed. Rather than flooding the schools with all students at one time, he offered that CCSD took a deliberate approach in having each cohort come for a week. During the second week of school, cohort B came to school and learned the mitigation strategies and expectations, while cohort A was online doing distance delivery. He said by week three, the district brought all students back to the building, but separated by the cohort model, which is how the district has been operating since August.

MR. RUSSIN said there were few positive cases in the school. He offered that recently nine students tested positive [for COVID-19] from an event outside of the school, but there was no spread of COVID-19 within the school. He attributed that to the mitigation strategies.

MR. RUSSIN explained that students come to school for part of the day, and then work independently with para-professional and family support outside of the structured school day. He said that students work for a few hours doing independent study and exploratory study. He noted that this aligns with one of the fundamental tenants of CCSD's strategic vision, "that learning happens outside of the four walls of the school building." He said the district has partnered with families and local entities to help make that successful.

[8:15:13 AM](#)

MR. RUSSIN said CCSD was following the waiver process from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for a food service program and has been distributing over 2,000 meals a week. He said the school population was at 288 students this past year, although normally the district has between 325 to 330 students. He explained "brick and mortar" enrollment is down 15 to 19 percent this year. The district has a correspondence program, but he said it doesn't compare to some of the other

state correspondence programs. He said 25 students who left in-person schooling have enrolled in the city's correspondence program, and between 5 to 10 students have selected other correspondence programs in the state.

MR. RUSSIN said there is in-person schooling Monday through Thursday. He shared that on Fridays, students have the opportunity to come to school to work in small groups or with paraprofessionals. He shared that students also take field trips and explore the Cordova area on Fridays. He noted that the district has had sports and activities the past year, but with no student or staff travel. He explained that the focuses have been on skill building, being part of a team, and resiliency.

8:17:56 AM

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent, Alaska Gateway School District (AGSD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. He shared that he has been with AGSD for 20 years and has been its superintendent for the last 5 years. He said that in March of 2020, when the school shut down was announced, his staff used spring break to design a virtual learning program, and "made do." He commented that the district kept all of its staff employed and made and delivered over 5,000 meals weekly. During this transition, teachers made packets for parents [to assist in home learning] and were often working 12- to 14-hour days. He shared that in the summer the district "re-tooled with the intent of going into a virtual blended learning program." He explained that the district merged hands-on activities with computer-assisted and classroom instruction, which continued into the fall for three weeks. He said the intention was that the district could move classes into and out of the school as needed.

MR. MACMANUS said that AGSD made certain all students had computers that could be taken home. He explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, about 50 percent of homes had Internet, but had since pushed that to 98 percent. He said the district worked with local Internet service providers (ISPs) and came up with a subsidized Internet plan of which AGSD paid for a portion. He explained this was with the intention of [the schools] moving in and out of closure, using the "Alaska's Smart Start 2020" plan from the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). He said there had been some cases in the community, but AGSD is not aware of any cases of in-school transmission.

8:22:19 AM

MR. MACMANUS attributed that to mitigations that had been put into place such as masks. He shared that there has been testing in the district since November 2020. He said that with BynaxNOW testing the district caught a number of cases before they got into the schools, which has helped the district remain open.

MR. MACMANUS said that despite all the effort, the [blended learning plan] wasn't working. He said students were not very responsive, it was difficult to maintain contact with homes, and spite of the Internet availability, there were bandwidth issues. He explained that AGSD was constantly reevaluating the program and retooled again in the late fall.

8:21:29 AM

MR. MACMANUS continued, stating that kids did not necessarily respond well to distance learning. In late fall, 2020, the district retooled its approach based on the Alaska Statewide Virtual School (AKSVS) training taken by the Eagle, Alaska school. He shared that the district took a longer in-service in January so as to have time to train for the new education delivery method, which focused on a personalized learning approach. He said all schools are currently open, although the district has had to close schools briefly. He shared that there was one COVID-19 case the past week, but it had been caught with the district's screening protocols, which allowed the school to stay open. He noted that this has repeatedly been the case.

8:25:51 AM

MR. MACMANUS said that the district had a sports program, including basketball and volleyball. He explained that all players tested every week and before games, and all the teams they play also test before the games. Teams have refused to test, he commented, and so AGSD did not play those teams with the hope that they can schedule games the following year.

MR. MACMANUS said the district had 95 percent of its families having students in-person in school. He shared that the schools have antigen testing and are running "fairly normally." He said visitors are allowed but are tested and must wear masks and maintain distance. He offered that the district was preparing for an intra district basketball tournament.

[8:27:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for clarification about the learning program AGSD used that had the most success.

MR. MACMANUS answered that AKSVS was promoted last year by DEED. He commented that the program is a lot of work for teachers. He said it wasn't as simple as giving students computers, and it was labor intensive on the teachers' side to facilitate the learning and set up the hands-on activities; however, the district found it worked when done correctly.

MR. MACMANUS shared that AGSD uses Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment testing. He said this helps educators design instruction to meet individual needs. This, with AKSVS, has been very helpful to the district, he explained, in maintaining student fidelity to a curriculum. He said in the small schools, this has made a "big difference."

[8:29:51 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. Russin what the greatest needs of CCSD's students at this point in the school year were.

MR. RUSSIN replied that at a recent school board meeting, CCSD's student representative said, "We need more time," in the current schedule. Said students are lined up, waiting to get in the building every morning because they need to be in school, need interaction with friends, need the stability of a schedule, and need the interaction with school and staff. He said that tied to social and emotional learning (SEL) needs, explaining that that even though CCSD was able to have in-person school, it isn't what is usual or normal. He asserted that children need some sense of normalcy in their lives. He opined that in a small community such as Cordova, the school district plays a critical role in helping to meet the academic and the SEL needs of students.

MR. RUSSIN said CCSD is in the early stages of training 10 of its 60 staff members in an SEL framework with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI). He said at the start of the next school year, the district would "pull in" community members and families to receive the training, so that students can be supported both in and out of school.

[8:33:14 AM](#)

MR. RUSSIN referred to the list of topics and questions [included in the committee packet] and addressed the next topic, which was a question concerning district plans to address learning loss and credit recovery for at-risk students. He informed the committee that Cordova has a small graduating class this year of 17 seniors, 3 of whom have already finished all of their credits after the first semester. He said the junior/senior high school has a program called the Attendance, Behavior, and Course-Grades Early Warning System (ABCEWS) which is used to identify students who are in need of support. He said he was uncomfortable with the term learning loss and explained that there is a broad assumption that all students have lost a year of learning [because of the pandemic], but he asserted that that is not true. He agreed that life hasn't been normal for students, but he stated that educators must address the notion of learning loss, ask whether it has happened, and, if so, to what degree. He said CCSD uses MAP assessment data, and that shows comparative data to previous years.

MR. RUSSIN emphasized that CCSD is constantly in a state of trying to do better and to help students achieve more but is taking the notion of learning loss with a cautious approach. He said the district didn't want "to get caught up in the rhetoric that every student has lost a year of learning." He asserted that maintaining context was important to the district as it continued to assess the needs of its students. He concluded by reiterating the importance of students' SEL needs.

[8:37:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. MacManus what he saw as the greatest needs of his students at the end of the pandemic school year.

MR. MACMANUS shared that AGSD is an SEL district that has been using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model for the past five years. He said it had taken on a new importance for the district and shared that AGSD currently has a grant that has allowed an extra counselor on staff. He said that small, normal everyday things can suddenly turn into big things. The stress of the pandemic, he opined, ripples through the community and has caused challenges.

MR. MACMANUS stated his agreement with previous comments about lost learning. He said he was aware of the worry, but that he wasn't seeing it in his district's test scores, which have gone up. He relayed that his teachers said this was because the

students were trying and working harder. He explained that this effort wasn't sustainable and said that "people are tired."

MR. MACMANUS offered that counseling is an issue and asserted that children need to be in school. He opined that this has become more apparent, and he emphasized his observation that students need [school's] social structure. He pointed out attendance and participation in after school activities.

8:41:30 AM

MR. MACMANUS commented that Tok, Alaska, has a wide range of views about how to approach the pandemic, which he is trying to balance. He shared AGSD has support from other districts, largely facilitated by the Alaska Superintendents Association (ASA). He said initially during the pandemic, ASA was meeting daily, which transitioned to a few times weekly, and now once every other week. He said one of the issues that had been discussed is equity amongst homes. He said this has largely been addressed through Internet access. He noted that turning a computer into a textbook has made the job of a teacher much more difficult. He explained students are not in the same place in their content, which makes it hard for a teacher to have a regular class.

8:44:40 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY commented that the committee appreciates the work that educators have been putting forth. She asked Ms. Gaborik what she was seeing as the greatest needs of her students when closing out the pandemic school year.

DR. GABORIK reiterated her colleagues' statements. She said that in terms of academics, "it's a hyper focus on areas that we're always focused on." She mentioned that early literacy is a concern for kindergarten through the third-grade as children return to in-person learning. She commented that some students are not "where they might have been at this time in the school year." She discussed high school students, sharing that it was a priority to make sure that this year's seniors have the supports they need to stay on track for graduation. She said some students hadn't done any work prior to returning to classes in February 2021. She emphasized providing supports for these students to recover credits and shared that FNSBSD runs a program called "intersession" in June for students to catch up on credits. She shared that the district added the program in January this past year. She said there has been space in the

schedule where students have had extra time for academic supports and focusing credit recovery.

8:47:04 AM

DR. GABORIK addressed students' social and emotional needs. She said the pandemic has highlighted the complexity of wraparound services for families and referred to the agencies involved as "a community chain." She stated that when the chain is broken, schools are the front line, in terms of analysis and crisis response. She explained that when children aren't in the building, staff doesn't have the opportunity to identify whether a student or family is in crisis and needs help or a referral. She said as students return to in-person learning, staff are trying to be "hyper-vigilant" observing students and reaching out to families.

DR. GABORIK said food insecurity has been an issue, so it has been important to provide breakfast and lunch to students. She explained that even with efforts by the district to provide food at multiple drop-off points, there was a significant drop in the number of families accessing the service. She said now that students are back [in-person], utilization of the service has risen. She discussed the broad definition of homeless students and how time spent in school is important to help homeless students navigate their situations. She explained that the school has food pantries with clothing and supplies with the help of community partners. She said getting those basic needs to children and families was difficult when schools were closed.

8:50:39 AM

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked what each district's plans were for helping students prepare for the following year during the summer.

DR GABORIK responded that FNSBSD is expanding its summer options for students as made possible under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. She commented that staff are tired, which is making it difficult to fill the summer school teaching and support positions. She said the district was trying to be strategic about that by having the first round of programs in June, then taking a break until August for some elementary school programs. She offered a "K-3 Jump Start Program" as an example of a new offering before school began in the fall.

8:52:50 AM

MR. MACMANUS stated that two schools completely closed during Thanksgiving of 2020 and the following Christmas. He explained those two schools would be operating into June 2021. He said this was done with the communities with the expectation the schools would be further along.

MR. MACMANUS said that in terms of summer programs, the district would be hosting summer camps for students who hadn't finished their credits, so they could do the work required to finish their classes. These are bootcamps, he explained, that are targeted specifically on what students need to do to get classes wrapped up. He agreed with Dr. Gaborik's comments about the difficulty of hiring staff for the summer months. He offered that his district has addressed the issue by utilizing new staff that was hired for the oncoming school year. He shared that his district has a high population of Alaska Natives and is trying to incorporate summer subsistence activities into academic learning. He offered the example of a fishwheel project being done in cooperation with the National Park Service (NPS) in the Wrangell-St. Elias Park. He said the district would be taking students down for a weeklong camp along the Copper River that would fulfill curriculum requirements by including fisheries biology. He shared that the trip also would teach them about camping and fishing techniques that are important for village life.

8:56:17 AM

MR. RUSSIN told Representative Hopkins that it is CCSD's intent to offer two different summer school sessions. He said the first is scheduled in May and June and will focus on the district's migrant students. He said that at the end of July through the beginning of August, the district will host "a bootcamp" program for students with federal funds. He said this camp would pay particular attention to incoming kindergarten students. He explained that there are 40 new students, and they did not have the opportunity for pre-kindergarten, because the district was unable to run it during the 2020-2021 school year.

8:57:38 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked Mr. Russin to define migrant students.

MR. RUSSIN replied that 30 percent of his district's student population qualifies as migrant students. He said it was based on federal guidelines for students who do "migrant activities" or subsistence activities outside of Cordova. He said this could mean going out on a boat and fishing for a period of time for at least seven days and seven nights of the year, although it didn't have to be consecutive. He also offered berry picking and gathering as activities. He clarified that this referred to students who went outside of the community to help meet family needs.

8:59:16 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked Dr. Gaborik how students have fared academically, noting that the other two presenters had mentioned MAP testing.

DR. GABORIK replied that she had heard anecdotally from other superintendents that the district would see an increase in test scores; however, she argued that is directly related to who is testing. She explained that she felt both MAP and Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) would provide an interesting data point but argued that the district would have to look at who did and didn't test. She commented that the students who "had been hanging with us" had probably had family support to test. She argued that it was important to recognize that the students that didn't have that support may not test because they do have an opt-out option, which she thought the scores may reflect.

9:00:47 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. MacManus where his district stood financially.

MR. MACMANUS answered that many families moved to AGSD from larger cities when the pandemic began. This lead enrollment numbers to be near [pre-pandemic] estimates, which he explained did not negatively impact district funding. He also shared that AGSD's correspondence program had about 10 percent increased enrollment. He noted, however, that the district has been flat funded for a number of years, which is a cost to AGSD of between \$700,000 to \$1,000,000 in terms of buying power.

MR. MACMANUS stated that since AGSD is a small district, it has had to rely on grants. He said most of what he had previously discussed regarding learning recovery had not been financed from

the district's general revenue. He explained that as a Regional Educational Attendance Area (REAA), AGSD does not have a local contribution. He said that instead it has Impact Aid Grant System money [from the United States Department of Education], of which it receives 10 percent.

MR. MACMANUS said the district has issues getting appropriately staffed and with deferred maintenance. He stated that finances are an issue for AGSD. He emphasized that the district has been hurting. He acknowledged that the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) money would help but commented that he was worried about the coming years.

[9:03:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Dr. Gaborik where FNSBSD stood financially.

DR. GABORIK stated that this has been the most challenging budget year she has ever experienced. She said there was a reduction in revenue due to the 2,000-student decrease in enrollment. She shared that the current year's revenue loss was over \$9 million, so the district completely drained its unassigned fund balance in order to cover the losses in the current year. She stated that the revenue loss next year would be \$22 million with the hold harmless protection accounted for. She said this was related specifically to the general fund (GF) and student enrollment. She said \$2 million was lost for transportation because of the lower student enrollment, along with monies for nutrition services.

DR. GABORIK said that because of the lost revenue, FNSBSD's school board is issuing \$26 million in cuts. She said the district is using Emergency Coronavirus Relief Act of 2020 funds to offset cutting some positions the district no longer can afford. However, she pointed out that grant funding teachers and staff is not sustainable. She said the district is planning to be strategic with funding from ARPA, by spreading it out through October 2024. She pointed out that as students return, state funds will not match the increased needs and will need to be supplemented. She summarized that FNSBSD is "in a tough spot," and that its "unassigned fund balance is projected to be near zero."

[9:07:42 AM](#)

MR. RUSSIN stated that as a city school district, CCSO relies on local contributions for its budget. Although historically

Cordova's city council had fully funded its portion of the district's budget, he said in the last three to five years its contributions have been lower, adding up to about \$1 million in budget losses. He said this has made CCSD have to consider spending down its fund balance, which is not necessarily operational cash, rather inventories and pre-paid expenses. He shared that since 2017, health insurance costs have increased between 15 and 20 percent along with the cost of salaries and associated accounts, while student enrollment has gone down.

MR. RUSSIN noted that budget conversations have been about the district's needs rather than its wants. He said the district doesn't believe its needs will change or be reduced, rather its needs have been increasing. He pointed out that the district was unable to provide a pre-kindergarten program during the current school year and likely wouldn't [have the resources to] offer a pre-kindergarten program the following year. He explained that the district didn't have the grant funding to continue these programs.

[9:11:39 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked Mr. MacManus to summarize how his district has worked with the local community.

MR. MACMANUS said his district comprised seven communities, six of which are villages. He said his approach has been to maintain constant communication with villages. He said the district has followed the communities' individual leads in closing schools and following each community's quarantine requirements. He said it is because of the villages and the Alaska Native community in the Arctic Gateway Borough that the district has done so well with vaccine distribution. He commented that AGSD has a great relationship with Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) and Ahtna, Incorporated.

[9:14:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK opined that Mr. MacManus gave a perfect example of why one size does not fit all.

CO-CHAIR STORY thanked each superintendent.

HB 19-LIMITED TEACHER CERTIFICATES; LANGUAGES

[9:15:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 19, "An Act relating to instruction in a language other than English; and establishing limited language immersion teacher certificates."

[9:16:31 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JONATHAN KREISS-TOMKINS, as prime sponsor, presented HB 19. He thanked the committee for the discussion during the previous hearing.

[9:17:14 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY moved to adopt Amendment 1 to HB 19, labeled 32-LS0169\B.1, which read as follows:

Page 2, lines 18 - 19:
Delete "(f) of this section and"

Page 2, lines 24 - 30:
Delete all material.

[9:17:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND objected for the purpose of discussion.

[9:17:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY explained that this amendment would remove subsection (f) from the proposed legislation. She argued that the language was "looking to resolve an issue that does not exist." She directed attention to subsection (c) and said there were already safety measures in place for a rigorous application process that would preclude world language teachers who teach non-indigenous languages from being able to misuse this type of certificate. She stated her belief that it was important to simplify the language, which would clarify the intention of HB 19 and focus on Alaska Native languages.

[9:19:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND removed her objection. There being no further objection, Amendment 1 was adopted.

[9:20:08 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commented that she was excited to bring this option to schools and noted that it was the third legislative session she had heard the proposed legislation. She mentioned that she was disappointed by the lack of public testimony and alluded to testimony that was given during past iterations of the proposed legislation.

[9:21:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if HB 19 was identical to the recent version that was crafted in the House Labor and Commerce Standing Committee during the previous legislative session.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS responded that it is identical to the version from the House Labor and Commerce Standing Committee from the previous legislature, with the exception of the amendment that was just adopted.

[9:22:14 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND moved to report HB 19, as amended, out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSHB 19(EDC) was reported out of the House Education Standing Committee.

[9:23:03 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:23 a.m. to 9:25 a.m.

HB 60-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

[9:25:56 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 60, "An Act relating to mental health education." [The motion made on 3/31/21 to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 60, Version 32-LS0261\B, Klein, 3/25/21, as a work draft was left pending with an objection.]

[9:26:38 AM](#)

SOPHIE JONAS, Staff, Representative Matt Claman, Alaska State Legislature, presented HB 60 on behalf of Representative Claman, prime sponsor. She clarified that the only thing the proposed legislation would mandate would be that the Alaska State Board of Education update guidelines to include instruction in mental

health. She explained that it would not mandate that school districts adopt a specific curriculum, rather the guidelines could be voluntarily incorporated.

[9:27:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if the proposed legislation would offer guidelines to teach students about mental health situations and how they could seek help within the health curriculum.

MS. JONAS confirmed that was correct.

[9:27:53 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked how many districts already had guidelines in place.

MS. JONAS replied that she did not know how many, but she would find an answer to the question. She offered that by having state-wide guidelines, schools could have a standardized format to implement their own mental health curricula.

[9:28:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY opened invited testimony on HB 60.

[9:29:24 AM](#)

JASON LESSARD, Executive Director, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Anchorage, provided invited testimony on HB 60. He stated his belief that mental health education is an important and vital component to Alaska schools' curricula. He stated his desire to dispel misunderstandings that he was hearing from the proposed legislation's opposition. He argued that there is no "indoctrination" or mandate implied by HB 60, rather it is an update to [AS 14.30.360(a)], which reads, "Each district in the state public school system shall be encouraged to initiate and conduct a program in health education for kindergarten through grade 12." He said that school districts should operate in a safe and effective manner and opined that not all programs that are brought into schools to talk about this subject do this well. He said NAMI Anchorage would like to have evidence-based programs and best practices involved to help school districts.

MR. LESSARD mentioned a letter of opposition from the Alaska Republicans of District 3 [included in the committee packet] and referenced a line from paragraph 8 which read, "Whereas any given district may pursue such standards through their local school boards if they choose," with which he agreed. He explained that the proposed legislation would not change that, rather it helps to bring on programs that will work and be effective. He offered an anecdote about a high school's response to a suicide in Anchorage. He said the school rolled out a program with good intentions but without involving best practices. He stated that the program had adverse effects on the students. He reiterated that the goal of the legislation was to help districts with [these issues] in a safe and effective way. He explained that there are experts involved and school districts across the nation who have been working on this. He emphasized that the intention is not to take away school districts' decision whether to implement a mental health program, rather to be sure that a program being brought on is safe. He summarized his argument by stressing that the proposed legislation is not a mandate and is not indoctrination; it is a way to help schools help students. He noted crisis levels of suicide in Alaska youth according to Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

9:32:21 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked Mr. Lessard to describe what the high school in Anchorage did that adversely affected students.

MR. LESSARD replied that the school showed a "somewhat dated" film that addressed suicide but did not facilitate a conversation or add any opportunity for dialogue. He explained that, although done with the best of intentions, this left many students feeling worse. He shared that there was a survey conducted by students at the school asking for other students' thoughts, and over 100 students responded. He said that the administration and students are now working together to bring programming to the school. He stressed the desire to bring on programs that are effective and evidence based.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked for a brief description of YRBS.

MR. LESSARD answered that the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is conducted every other year. He said it asks students questions related to topics such as substance abuse and mental health. He commented that the numbers he uses deal with suicide

ideation and suicide attempts. He said that from 2017 to 2019 there had been a significant increase in every category concerning suicide ideation and attempts.

[9:34:52 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX referenced page one of the "2019 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey Highlights," [hard copy included in included in committee packet]. He commented that the paper indicated that about 20 percent of students had attempted suicide. He asked if there had been follow up to verify the number.

MR. LESSARD replied that he had not followed up on the reported numbers. He explained that the state has been doing this survey through the Department of Health and Social Services for some time.

[9:36:10 AM](#)

EMMA KNAPP, Alumni, Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS), provided invited testimony in support of HB 60. She recalled her experience with mental health issues, and the need to address these issues with students. She told the committee that three weeks ago, a former student of her high school committed suicide. She explained that she knew the individual personally and took a week off from school to grieve. She stated that returning to school was a conscious decision she made with the help of her parents, therapist, and school counselor. She said the "dated film" that addressed suicide triggered her emotions surrounding her friend's death and triggered her previous suicidal ideations. She shared that she is now part of an effort at her school to make its mental health programs more accurate and comprehensive but argued that responsibility of an accurate mental health curriculum should not be put on students such as herself. She said if HB 60 were in place, she would not have had to get involved during the time she was grieving.

MS. KNAPP shared that two years ago she was "in a dark place," and suffered from depression and multiple panic attacks a week. She said that at the time, she didn't know these were "classifiable experiences." She said she was convinced that no one else felt that way and believed she would feel that way for the rest of her life. She explained that she didn't know that she needed help, because mental health was not normalized in schools. She shared that she went months without reaching out

for help. Once she got help, she said she still felt lost, found herself contemplating suicide, and was afraid to tell her therapist. She pointed out that all of this happened while she had a good support system, and that her family had the financial resources to get her help. She said she is "more than an anecdote," and she referenced statistics relating to depression in high school students. She argued that HB 60 would help individuals such as herself.

[9:40:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY thanked Ms. Knapp for her testimony and commended her poise and bravery.

[9:40:36 AM](#)

GEORGE RHYNEER JR, MD, provided invited testimony in support of HB 60. He stated that adults deal with their mental health every day, as do youth, but youth do not have experience [to understand how to process their mental health] and frequently have no help. He commented that it was encouraging to hear the superintendents who spoke previously discuss concerns about the mental health of their students, as that was not something talked about in the past. He said this wasn't something that required parental consent, as consent wasn't required for what was being introduced [regarding health education] now.

DR RHYNEER opined that a current problem in the United States, as exemplified by shootings and violence, is mental health. He stated that 22 children are shot in America per day, and half of the shootings are related to mental health issues. He urged the committee members to support HB 60, stating that healthy young individuals will become healthy adults.

[9:42:51 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY opened public testimony on HB 60.

[9:43:19 AM](#)

KATIE BOTZ testified in support of HB 60. She stated that it is important to address mental health for students, especially when students have been suffering from social distancing and not being able to be with their friends. She shared that she is a school bus driver for the Juneau School District. She said students don't know how to speak up about their issues and problems, and many don't know that it is okay to ask for help.

She stated that one cannot have physical health without mental health. She shared that she has major depressive disorder and has struggled during the pandemic. She shared that it is difficult to deal with depression and discussed the stigma of mental health.

9:45:24 AM

PAMELA SAMASH testified on HB 60. She said it has been "quite a journey listening to all these testimonies." She said she initially called in to testify in opposition, citing government overreach. After learning more, she stated, she now has questions regarding the proposed curriculum. She explained that while mental health is an issue, she has concerns about government becoming involved in citizens' private lives. She said she is on the fence regarding HB 60, but would like to see amendments protecting families from government overreach. She expressed concern about things being considered child abuse.

9:49:05 AM

KATHLEEN WEDEMEYER, Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), Alaska and Washington Chapter, testified in opposition to HB 60 and requested amendments to the proposed legislation. She said the intent to improve mental health education must be focused on improving the health of youth and should be with the full agreement of parents. She argued that there are several problems with mental health education in schools. She said mental health education is driven by providers who benefit from screening, referrals, diagnosis, and treatment that has led to roughly 7 million youth being on psychiatric drugs. She said parents should have the right to say "no," if psychiatrists and psychologists are using schools to test or assess students. She said the only groups that benefit from such screenings are psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry. She said suicide should be seen as a behavior rather than a mental health disorder. She said that the Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Council recognizes this to be true. She asked that the proposed legislation be amended to broaden the scope of the committee in each district to include parents, healthcare professionals, business leaders, and spiritual advisors. She said CCHR would be happy to discuss the legislation and provide materials on its points.

9:52:48 AM

APRIL ORTH testified in opposition to HB 60. She declared herself a proponent for mental health, citing it as "amazing and necessary in our families that need the services." However, she said she is opposed to mental health education in school districts. She argued that there are services that identify young people who need help that keep parents involved. She said mental health is a "whole family experience," and she expressed concern that the proposed legislation would separate parents from children. She also argued that mental health care in school couldn't be covered by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). She said the proposed legislation was being sold with "emotional blackmail" which was a form of "indoctrination."

[9:56:35 AM](#)

BARBARA TYNDALL testified in opposition to HB 60. She said she agreed with the previous two testifiers' positions and argued that "guidelines tend to become mandates down the line." She referenced Representative Cronk's statement that one size does not fit all because Alaska is a large and diverse state. She pointed out her desire that parents be involved, and that this should be a local, community, and family issue.

[9:58:58 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY closed public testimony on HB 60.

[9:59:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked whether, under HB 60, the words "physical health" would be removed from statute.

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN, as prime sponsor, answered questions about HB 60. He replied that the language was removed during Legislative Legal Service's drafting of the proposed legislation.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS added that mental health was being added to the definition of what would be taught in "health and personal safety," which was previously described as "physical health and personal safety."

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK clarified that "physical" health would be removed from Section 2, subsection (a), and asked why that was.

CO-CHAIR STORY commented that it could be considered.

10:01:06 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX stated that he was struggling with the same ideas expressed by some of the testifiers. He said that addressing mental health in a public setting like schools opens up problems. He said that using a top-down approach would not work, and this required diversification.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN replied that the proposed legislation is not a mandate and has the goal of giving flexibility to local communities. He commented that current guidelines from the state leave room for districts to make their own policies, and this would be no different. He explained that the purpose of the proposed legislation is not to address what counselors may or may not do to help students, rather it is to add a discussion about mental health to health classes. He said this bill is not an effort to solve mental health problems or a constrictive approach.

10:04:56 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked about broadening the stakeholder group that creates the guidelines.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN replied that the language of the proposed CS for HB 60 was rewritten to be broad regarding who could participate in crafting guidelines.

10:07:01 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that HB 60 was held over. [The objection to the motion made on 3/31/21 to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 60, Version 32-LS0261\B, Klein, 3/25/21, as a work draft was left pending.]

10:07:34 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:07 a.m.